What type of literature is Revelation?

Apocalypse, Prophecy, Epistle, or something else?

Revelation is potentially the most confusing book in the New Testament. The imagery is strange, the numbers are mysterious, and the symbolism feels impossible to decode. So we turn to popular teachers who offer elaborate timelines and prophecy charts mapping Revelation's visions onto current events. Or we just walk away.

But the confusion is not the text's fault; it's a misunderstanding of what type of book Revelation is, its literary form, its genre.

What is genre? Genre is a type of literature with recognizable features and historical conventions that signal to the reader how the text is meant to be understood and interpreted. When we misidentify the genre of a biblical text, we risk misreading it. We find things that are not there and miss things that are. When we misread the Bible, we risk distorting our relationship with God.

So what type of book is Revelation? Is it a mystical vision of the future, or something else? Revelation is actually three types of genre. As Richard Bauckham writes, "Revelation seems to be an apocalyptic prophecy in the form of a circular letter to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia." Apocalypse *and* prophecy *and* epistle.

Revelation as Apocalypse

The first and most foundational genre of Revelation is apocalyptic literature, and it is the one many readers know the least about. Apocalyptic literature is a symbolic, visionary work revealing hidden heavenly realities to encourage God's people, not a sequential timeline or roadmap for the future, but assurance of the final cosmic restoration.

The very first word of the book in the original Greek is *Apokalypsis* (Ἀποκάλυψις), which means "to uncover, to take out of hiding, to cause something to be fully known." (NA27; Louw-Nida, p. 338) The NIV renders it "The revelation from Jesus Christ." The Wycliffe Bible calls it the "Apocalypse of Jesus Christ." The Message translates it as "A revealing of Jesus, the Messiah." Whatever the translation, the word itself announces what kind of book this is: a work of unveiling, a revealing, a revelation.

Apocalyptic literature was a recognizable Jewish literary style that flourished roughly between 200 BC and AD 200. It was not invented by John. Apocalyptic literature circulated during this period, texts like the Book of Enoch, 2 Baruch, and 4 Ezra. When John's letter arrived at the seven churches of Asia Minor, the recipients immediately recognized what they were holding.

They were not confused because they understood the conventions of the genre and knew how to read an apocalyptic work.

The strangeness of Revelation is a modern problem, not an ancient one. The original audience was not new to apocalyptic imagery. The conventions were familiar and the text was comprehensible. Let's try to recover a bit of that familiarity.

The Five Characteristics of Apocalyptic Literature

In *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (affiliate link), Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart identify five key characteristics of apocalyptic literature that apply directly to the book of Revelation.

1. **Rooted in Old Testament Prophecy**

The first characteristic is that apocalyptic literature is rooted in Old Testament prophecy, particularly the books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Joel, and Zechariah. Like the prophets before them, the apocalyptists were concerned with God's coming judgment and salvation. But the apocalyptic genre was born in a specific context: persecution and oppression. Under the crushing weight of foreign empires, the apocalyptists stopped looking for God's activity within ordinary history and looked forward to the time when God would bring a final triumph of good and a definitive judgment of evil. This is why apocalyptic literature carries such intensity.

2. **Literary Work**

The second characteristic is that apocalypses are literary works from the beginning. The prophets were primarily spoken messengers whose oracles were later committed to writing. Apocalypses are different. They are composed as literature, with deliberate structure, carefully arranged sequences, and formal design. John is explicitly told to write: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches" (Revelation 1:11). This is a composed, literary document, rather than a transcript of spoken prophecy.

3. **Visions, Dreams, Symbolic Language**

The third characteristic is that apocalyptic content is often presented through visions and dreams in cryptic, symbolic language. Most apocalypses also employed a literary device called pseudonymity, attributing the work to an ancient worthy like Enoch or Baruch in order to give it an aura of ancient authority. These figures were portrayed as receiving visions that were then "sealed up" for a future generation, the future generation conveniently being the one in which the book was actually written. This convention allowed apocalyptic writers to speak into their own historical moment under the guise of an ancient name.

Unlike this genre, the author of Revelation, John, uses his own name, identifying himself as the author. He does not attribute his visions to Moses or Elijah. He makes himself known to his readers, addressing churches he knows personally. This highlights the pastoral care John put into this work meant to benefit real churches in real times and places. They knew him and he knew them.

4. **Fantastical (rather than realistic)**

The fourth characteristic is that apocalyptic imagery is fantastical rather than realistic. The prophets used symbolic language too, but their images were drawn from the real world: salt, doves, half-baked bread, vultures and carcasses. Apocalyptic imagery operates differently. A beast with seven heads and ten horns, a woman clothed with the sun, locusts with scorpions' tails and human faces, these are not descriptions of literal creatures. The fantasy lies not necessarily in the individual elements but in their unearthly combination. A beast is real. Heads are real. Horns are real. But a single beast with seven heads and ten horns is not a zoological description. It is symbolic and visionary and meant to be read that way.

Consider how Revelation uses earthquakes. In Revelation 6:12, the opening of the sixth seal brings a great earthquake. In Revelation 8:5, an angel hurls fire to the earth, and an earthquake follows. In Revelation 11:19, the opening of God's temple in heaven is accompanied by an earthquake. In Revelation 16:18, the greatest earthquake in human history strikes. Are these four separate geological events? More likely earthquakes are a recurring symbolic image for divine judgment, a visual vocabulary John's readers would have recognized immediately from the Old Testament prophetic tradition. Treating these as literal predictions of future seismic activity is a category error, like reading the seven-headed beast as a creature that could be photographed.

5. **Not Always Chronological**

The fifth characteristic is that apocalyptic literature expresses themes without requiring a strict chronological sequence. In Revelation, the visions are arranged in carefully structured sets that share similarities: seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls. These sets express themes without necessarily implying that each vision follows the one before it in time. They circle back, overlap, and deepen, expressing the same theological realities from different angles. While they appear to follow a sequence, the sequence is not necessarily chronological. Reading them as a literal timeline of future events is one of the most consequential missteps in popular end-times interpretation, and it flows from a misunderstanding of the genre.

The book of Daniel illustrates this principle clearly. In Daniel 2:44-45, the vision of a great statue describes God setting up an eternal kingdom that crushes all others. In Daniel 7:26-27, similar themes reappear: the court sits, evil is destroyed, and the kingdom is given to God's people forever. These are not two separate prophecies about two separate future events. Instead they are two visionary expressions of the same theological truth told in different symbolic registers. We see a similar framework in Revelation.

Revelation as Prophecy

John does not simply write an apocalypse. He writes a prophetic apocalypse, and he says so explicitly. In Revelation 1:3 he calls his book "this prophecy": "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near." He returns to this designation at the very end of the book

in Revelation 22:7: "Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy written in this scroll." The book of Revelation is part of the prophetic genre.

Prophetic literature is a divinely commissioned message calling God's people to faithfulness in suffering or prosperity, declaring God's salvation and judgment over evil, and promising God's blessing for obedience and trust.

To understand the prophetic genre, we need to recover a biblical understanding of what prophecy actually is. The popular assumption is that prophecy is primarily about predicting the future. It is not. As Fee and Stuart write, "To prophesy does not primarily mean to foretell the future but rather to speak forth God's word in the present, a word that usually had as its content coming judgment or salvation" (*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, p. 262).

In the Old Testament, prophets were what Fee and Stuart call "covenant enforcement mediators." They announced God's blessings for faithfulness and his curses for disobedience based on the Mosaic law. They spoke God's word, not their own, prefacing their messages with "Thus says the Lord." They served as God's direct representatives, ambassadors from the heavenly court, and their message was not original but a fresh, Spirit-inspired restatement of what God had already revealed through Moses (p. 190-194).

This means that Old Testament prophecy follows a recognizable pattern: if you obey, blessing will follow; if you disobey, judgment will come. Hosea does not invent new moral standards when he accuses Israel of cursing, lying, murder, stealing, and adultery in Hosea 4:2. He is holding the nation accountable to the Ten Commandments. Amos does not introduce a new economic ethic when he condemns those who sell the poor for a pair of sandals in Amos 2:6. He is enforcing what the Mosaic law already required in Exodus through Deuteronomy.

Prophecy is less about future-telling and more about truth-telling.

Revelation shares a similar ethos. The OT pattern is: if you disobey, this will happen. The Revelation pattern is: if you hold fast to Christ, you will share in his victory. Revelation 2:10 calls for faithfulness, “Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.” Likewise, Revelation 22:7 ends the book by repeating this pattern, “Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy written in this scroll.”

This prophetic dimension of Revelation has a direct bearing on who the book is for and what it says to them. Bauckham makes the crucial observation that the seven letters of Revelation 2 and 3 address a striking range of pastoral situations. Not all of John's readers were poor and suffering under Roman persecution. Many were affluent and compromising. As Bauckham writes in *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (affiliate link), "By no means all of his readers were poor and persecuted by an oppressive system: many were affluent and compromising with the oppressive system. The latter are offered not consolation and encouragement, but severe warnings and calls to repent" (p. 15).

This is a word the American church needs to hear with particular care. Have we preached a message of grace and salvation without calls for God's justice and protection for the poor, foreigners, and marginalized? While there are many churches that do both well, it seems like they are the outliers, not the norm. Some have allowed politics to define their love of neighbor and so we all need to hear John's sharp rebukes and exhortations.

Revelation as prophecy means it is not primarily a roadmap for the future. It is a present word from God to his people, calling them to faithfulness in their own time and in every time.

Revelation as Epistle

The third genre is the one most easily overlooked as we typically associate it with Paul's writings. Revelation is a letter.

An epistle is a formal letter written to address the needs, struggles, and questions of a person or church, meant for circulation among Christian communities. If you read the opening and closing of Revelation, you find all the standard features of a first-century letter. John identifies himself as the author. He addresses his readers directly: "To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you" (Revelation 1:4). He closes with a benediction: "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen" (Revelation 22:21). And in Revelation 1:11, he is told explicitly: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."

These are real cities. These are real churches. These are real people who received this letter in the late first century, gathered in their homes, and listened as someone read it aloud. Fee and Stuart press this point, "The significance of this is that, as with all epistles, there is an occasional aspect to Revelation. It was occasioned at least in part by the needs of the specific churches to which it is addressed. Therefore, to interpret, we must try to understand its original historical context" (*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, p. 262).

Just as Paul wrote to the Corinthians to address real problems in that community, John wrote to the seven churches of Asia Minor in response to their real situations under Roman imperial pressure, present and future. The believers faced active persecution, the seductive pull of imperial power, economic pressure to participate in false worship, and more.

Understanding Revelation as an epistle does not reduce it to a purely historical document with nothing to say to us today. It does the opposite. It anchors the book's cosmic visions in the concrete circumstances of real human communities. The letter to the Romans was written to a specific community in a specific city facing specific tensions. That particularity does not limit its relevance. It helps it speak to us today in our particular time and place.

Bauckham captures this when he describes how John wrote the seven messages to the seven churches to function within the larger structure of the book. "In this way he shows the Christians of each of the seven churches how the issues in their local context belong to, and must be

understood in the light of, God's cosmic battle against evil and his eschatological purpose of establishing his kingdom." (*The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, p. 15)

The epistle genre connects the cosmic to the local. John shows each congregation that what they are experiencing in their city, in their workplace, in their family, is not isolated or meaningless. It is part of something vastly larger: the conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world, a conflict that has already been decided by the death and resurrection of the Lamb.

So What Does This Mean for Us?

Understanding what type of book Revelation is does not make it less mysterious or less magnificent. It makes it more so.

When you read Revelation as an apocalypse, knowing that it is a symbolic, visionary work revealing hidden heavenly realities rather than a sequential timeline of future events, you stop trying to decode it like a puzzle. You start receiving Revelation like a vision offered to you and your church community to give you a new perspective on what it means to live faithfully today.

When you read Revelation as prophecy, you hear it as God's encouragement for if you are suffering for your faith, and God's loving rebuke if you are compromising with wealth and power.

When you read Revelation as an epistle, you are reminded that you are part of a community of believers stretching back thousands of years who have read these same words in their own times and found in them the assurance that God is on the throne, the Lamb has already conquered, and the final cosmic restoration of all things is certain.

When many people come to Revelation, they ask what it predicts. They want a roadmap for the future. Instead, we should all be asking how it can give us a new vision for reality. And what Revelation reveals, above all else, is this: no matter what you suffer, no matter what empire or ideology or spiritual darkness presses against you, Jesus wins. And if you belong to him, so do you.

What's Next?

If this has been helpful, we invite you to watch our full video, *What Type of Book is Revelation? What Most People Miss*, where Jonathan and Monica walk through each of these three genres in depth with examples from the text, alongside the Book of Enoch and Daniel. You can also download our free slide deck, which includes all the definitions, quotes, and biblical examples from the video, at theology-together.kit.com/revelation-genre.

Jonathan and Monica Romig hold Master of Divinity degrees from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and hope you'll learn about God with us at Theology Together.

Discussion Questions

1. Before reading this post, how would you have described the book of Revelation to someone who had never read it? How has your understanding of what type of book it is changed or deepened?
2. The non-chronological nature of apocalyptic literature is one of the most challenging features for modern readers to accept. What would it look like practically to read Revelation as a series of overlapping visions expressing themes rather than as a linear timeline of future events?
3. Fee and Stuart describe prophecy as less about "future-telling" and more about "truth-telling." How does this reframing change the way you read not only Revelation but the Old Testament prophets as well?
4. Bauckham points out that Revelation addresses both persecuted Christians and affluent, compromising Christians with very different messages. Which of those two groups do you think most closely reflects your situation, and what does Revelation say to you?
5. Revelation declares that the Lamb has already conquered. How does the death and resurrection of Jesus change the way you face suffering, compromise, or fear in your own life right now?

Works Cited (affiliate links)

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This post was drafted with the assistance of AI tools and reviewed and edited by the authors.

Watch the YouTube video. We also recommend Jonathan's read aloud Doctor of Ministry paper's section on Revelation, and his video on Old Testament themes in Revelation.